
George Ripley and Alchemical Consensus

*Jennifer M. Rampling**

Alchemical practitioners frequently sought to demonstrate the credibility of their writings by appropriating the wisdom of their authoritative predecessors, while condemning the practices of “false” alchemists. Sometimes, however, respected authorities appear to disagree, both with one another and with other texts attributed to them. The English alchemist George Ripley (c. 1415–1490) was particularly deft at reconciling potential conflicts between his sources, to the extent that later, pseudo-epigraphic works also imitated his placatory approach. This paper represents a summary of the argument presented at the Sixth International Conference on the History of Chemistry.

Introduction

In 1317 Pope John XXII issued his famous decretal against the practice of alchemy. One of the charges laid against the alchemists was the inconsistency of their texts, which, in undermining the unity of alchemy as a discipline, also raised questions over its right to be regarded as a science. Disputing over the precise ingredients and processes to be used was a well-established alchemical tradition. For instance, in a tenth-century treatise, the *Mâ' al-Waraqî*, Ibn Umail rebuked foolish practitioners who, by ignorantly misreading their authorities, attempted to use human hair in their works – a barb probably aimed at the *Shawâhid* of Muhammad bin Zakarîyâ ar-Râzî, which explicitly recommended such animal products as hair and eggs.¹ Yet many medieval Latin texts sought to reconcile contradictory authorities, where necessary reinterpreting their words. For instance, the philosophers' frequent references to hair, blood and eggs are explained in the fourteenth-century *De Secretis naturae* of pseudo-Arnald of Villanova as metaphorical code names for the elements. The philosophers deliberately obscured their true meaning with cover names, or *decknamen*, in order to protect their knowledge from the unworthy.²

* Department of History and Philosophy of Science. University of Cambridge. Free School Lane. Cambridge CB2 3RH. United Kingdom. jmr82@cam.ac.uk

George Ripley and the pseudo-Lullian corpus

This paper considers how potential conflicts between authorities are handled in some of the texts attributed to one fifteenth-century English alchemist, George Ripley (c.1415–1490). While condemning “false books” and warning of obscure language intended to deceive “fools,” Ripley’s work is generally respectful towards the great alchemical authorities. Indeed, by showing how apparent differences could be reconciled, Ripley and those who later wrote under his name were able to confirm their own status as adepts, and to site themselves firmly on the side of the philosophers, rather than with the fools who misunderstood and misapplied alchemical secrets.

Little is known of the life of George Ripley, a Canon Regular of the priory at Bridlington in Yorkshire, except that he obtained a papal dispensation to study at university for seven years, with the option of studying abroad.³ Later, he was to enjoy one of the most successful posthumous careers of any English alchemist, and enjoyed that highest of chymical compliments – the attribution of a large number of pseudo-epigraphic works. For the purposes herein, only the two texts most reliably attributed to Ripley: his famous poem, the *Compound of Alchemy*, or *Twelve Gates*, and the Latin prose work, the *Medulla Alchymiae*, are regarded as original works.

In both of these works, the influence of pseudo-Lullian alchemical texts is overwhelming. Although the historical Ramon Lull denied the possibility of alchemy, over one hundred works are pseudonymously ascribed to him, espousing a variety of alchemical doctrines. As Michela Pereira has noted, some compilers attempted to organize the diverse and often contradictory Lullian works into a unified corpus.⁴ Ripley’s later reputation appears to stem from success in just such an endeavour, a fact recognised in the 1649 edition of his *Opera omnia*, featuring twelve of his attributed works, published in Cassel. The editor, Ludwig Combach, devoted the larger part of his introduction not to Ripley, but to Lull, stressing Ripley’s primary value as an expositor of Lull’s works.⁵ In Elias Ashmole’s paraphrase, Ripley “has great Affinity with the Writings of *Lully*, insomuch that the one explaineth the other”.⁶

When considering Lull in relation to other authorities, however, Ripley was similarly concerned to present both opinions as potentially valid. We see this both in the *Compound of Alchemy*, where Ripley presents the alternative recipes of Lull and Roger Bacon as equally valid, and also in the *Medulla*, where a ‘water’ described by Guido de Montanor is suggested as a more readily available alternative

to the Lullian recipe⁷. In both cases, Ripley presents alternatives to strict Lullian practice. The *Medulla* also provides interesting evidence of Ripley's attempts to reconcile conflicts between different Lullian texts, particularly between those arguing for the inclusion of organic ingredients (such as 'quintessence of wine') and those forbidding non-metalline materials. Ripley's ingenious solution is to gloss a passage from the Lullian *Epistola accurtationis*, which uses quintessence of wine, using terms taken from another core Lullian text, the *Testamentum*, which refer to non-organic ingredients.⁸ This decision appears to have its origin from Ripley's own observation that distilled alcohol is too weak to affect the changes described in his source, and hence must represent a deliberate obscuration of the true ingredient. For Ripley, the authority of his source was thus preserved, as was the "metal-only" composition of the philosophers' stone.

The linkage of Ripley's name with attempts to attain consensus between his sources is also apparent in other, less reliably attributed items in the 'Ripley corpus.' One particularly intriguing example is the *Concordantia Raymundi Lullii & Guidonis*, a short text aimed at reconciling a potential conflict between Ripley's two favourite authorities, Lull and Guido, over whether the ferment to be used in the work should be common gold, or gold which has first been decocted.⁹ This text, the earliest copy of which dates to the mid-sixteenth century, bears striking similarities with Ripley's handling of the same problem in his Compound and *Medulla*. Less convincingly 'Ripleian' is a commentary on Aristotle and Hermes, circulating in the last quarter of the sixteenth century, which attempts to reconcile the two ancient authorities. This text appears to have been adapted from an earlier, fifteenth-century work attributed to one Richard of Salopia, to which Ripleian characteristics (including references to Lull and Guido) have been appended by a later compiler.¹⁰

Conclusion

Taken together, these texts chart a fascinating change of emphasis in Ripley's reputation. The Canon's original works expounded and popularized Lullian doctrines, helping embed them in existing alchemical traditions while advertising Ripley's own mastery of his sources. A century later, Ripley had become an authority in his own right, his own name used to lend authority to alchemical texts.

References

- ¹ H. E. Stapleton, *Three Arabic Treatises on Alchemy by Muhammad bin Umail (10th Century A.D.)* (Calcutta: Memoirs of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, XII, 1933), 142.
- ² “Fatui autem intelligentes litteram operati sunt de ovis, de sanguine, de capillis, de rebis, de aluminibus, de salibus, et nihil invenerunt quia non bene intellexerunt dicta philosophorum obscure loquentium.” Antoine Calvet, “Le *De secretis naturæ* du pseudo-Arnaud-de Villeneuve,” *Chrysopoëia: Cinq traités alchimiques médiévaux* VI (1997-9): 155-206, on 180.
- ³ *Calendar of entries in the Papal registers relating to Great Britain and Ireland: Papal letters, Vol. XI: 1455-1464*, prepared by J.A. Twenlow (London: H.M.S.O., 1893), 530-1.
- ⁴ Michela Pereira, *The Alchemical Corpus Attributed to Raymond Lull* (London: Warburg Institute Surveys and Texts, 1989).
- ⁵ Ludwig Combach, ‘Praefatio ad lectorem,’ in George Ripley, *Opera omnia chemica, quotquot hactenus visa sunt, quorum aliqua jam primum in lucem prodeunt, aliqua MS. exemplarium collatione à mendis & lacunis repurgata, atque integrati restitua sunt*, ed. Ludwig Combach (Cassell: typis Jakob Gentschii, impensis Sebald Köhlers, 1649), ff. 2r-7r.
- ⁶ Elias Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* (London, 1652; repr. New York and London: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1967), 458.
- ⁷ “Caeterum quia haec res rarò reperitur in partibus nostris, aliisque quibusdam regionibus, ideò Guido de Montanor Graecus Philosophus invenit aliam humiditatem unctuosam, quae natat super alios liquores.” Ripley, *Opera omnia chemica*, 167-8.
- ⁸ “[I]deò loquemur aliquid ampliùs de hoc igne contra naturam: & est aqua mineralis valdè fortis & mortalis, quae pertinet ad Elixir illud. Et haec aqua extrahitur cum igne elementalì de quodam menstruo foetente, quod fit ex rebus quatuor, ut inquit Raymundus in epistola accurtat. & est aqua fortissima mundi” (Ripley, *Opera omnia chemica*, 167-8). The *Epistola accurtationes* omits mention of the fire against nature: “Tota enim via mineralium consistit in duabus aquis, quarum una facit lapidem volatilem sine labore & periculo: alia autem eum fixat, & secum fixatur cum periculo: quia haec aqua extrahitur, ut nostri ex quodam menstrualì foetenti immassati ex rebus quatuor, & fortior est aqua mundi & mortalis.” Jean-Jacques Manget, *Bibliotheca chemica curiosa, seu rerum ad alchemiam pertinentium thesaurus instructissimus* (Geneva: 1702), vol. 2, 864. The concept of the fire against nature is expounded in the Lullian *Testamentum*; a modern edition of which is provided by Michela Pereira and Barbara Spaggiari, *Il Testamentum alchemico attribuito a Raimondo Lullo: Edizione del testo latino e catalano dal manoscritto Oxford, Corpus Christi College, 255* (Florence: Sismel, 1999).
- ⁹ Ripley, *Opera omnia chemica*, 323-36.
- ¹⁰ The “Expositio textuum Aristotelis et Hermetis, secundum Ricardum de Salopia” (London, British Library MS. Sloane 3744, ff. 54r-60r) contains none of the “Ripleian” additions found in the “Tractatus expositivus Hermetis et Aristotelis,” attributed to Ripley in a sixteenth-century version (London, British Library MS. Harley 2411, ff. 7r-24v).